

Wyss Foundation Democracy Strategy Discussion Memo

Unmarried women, youth, and people of color – low-income populations who tend to be reliably progressive on economic and women’s inequality issues—do not participate equally in the democratic process. They are not registered, don’t turnout, and drop-off in non-presidential years. Since elected officials respond more to their voting constituents, policies are more conservative than the preferences of the young, unmarried, of-color majority. If low-income people voted at the same rate as high-income people, it would be easier to achieve the Foundation’s policy goals and it would ensure that the victories lasted beyond the foundation.

The ultimate goal of the Democracy Program is to create systemic change that will result in the government taking responsibility for all citizens voting (without philanthropy) by:

- **Remove Barriers** to voting through defensive litigation and advocacy on voting law;
- Create permanent **government-based, registration systems** and
- Help large service providers, like community health centers, register their clients.

In the short-term, highly-targeted (but relatively expensive) strategies could be used to increase registration – and ultimately participation – by the emerging progressive majority, closing the voting gap faster and substantially advancing the Foundation’s policy agenda by:

- Creating a **surge of registration** in tipping-point geographies to accelerate change;
- Engaging the new majority in the political system around the Foundation’s issue-agenda, through **political engagement** in a limited set of states important to our issue work and through **targeted communications** work to reach key demographics about the importance of voting.

If we don’t invest heavily in the Democracy strategies now, there is a risk that our ability to drive our issue agenda will be severely curtailed. These investments lay the groundwork for robust, transformative issue campaigns.

Systematic Change: Existing Investments

Remove barriers to voting. The Foundation has made initial investments to prevent the proliferation of restrictive voting laws and enact proactive voting reforms in the states, but progress in this area has been primarily defensive.

- **Litigation on voting laws (\$750,000):** Though the case is still being litigated, the **ACLU** helped prevent Wisconsin’s restrictive voter ID law from going into effect in the 2014 election cycle, which could have prevented as many as 300,000 eligible citizens from casting a ballot in November

(ongoing). It also fought laws in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Virginia and will continue to be a critical backstop against bad voting laws.

- **Advocacy on voting laws (\$1,600,000):** **State Voices** has regranted significant resources advocates in Florida, North Carolina, Wisconsin, and Michigan to fight restrictive voting laws. Additional resources are now going to Georgia, Nevada, and Ohio where new threats on Voter ID and limits to early voting have emerged. **The Center for Popular Democracy**, working for proactive reforms, is close to securing same-day registration in Delaware and restoring voting rights to ex-felons in Minnesota. Unfortunately, although this work has had some impact in specific states, it has not been guided by a comprehensive campaign strategy. We recommend a new approach.

Improve registration systems. By improving the country's registration systems through increased legal compliance and technology, the Foundation has already helped place a greater responsibility on government to register its citizens effectively. This work will pay massive dividends over the long-term.

- **DMV, public agency, and exchange-based registration (\$750,000):** Legal advocacy can improve state compliance with the National Voter Registration Act which requires the DMVs, public agencies, and—we believe—new federal and state health exchanges to offer voter registration. If low-performing states improved registration motor vehicle registration just slightly, **Demos and Project Vote** estimates they would register 18 million voters in just 2 years. These strategies are effective, but require slow-going litigation.
- **Better voter roll technology(\$1,000,000):** If state government use modern technology to update their voter rolls, track moves across states, and reach out to unregistered citizens it greatly increases the chances that young, low-income people who move frequently stay on the voter rolls. The **Electronic Registration Information Center** has helped Connecticut, Oregon, Louisiana, and Minnesota, and Illinois do just that, adding hundreds of thousands of new registrants.

Systematic Change: Proposed New Investment

- **Protect Our Vote (\$3 million):** Although existing grantees have attempted to fill the breach admirably in some states, the national infrastructure supporting voting rights advocacy is fractured and unable to systematically advance a set of pro-voting policies through a series of state-based wins, fighting pernicious voting laws (voter ID), and advancing proactive reforms (same-day registration). The staff believes there is no choice but to create a new campaign entity .

Similar to the Freedom to Marry model, this new organization, **Protect Our Vote**, would leverage the assets of existing organizations (State Voices, Center for Popular Democracy, and civil rights groups) while providing a much-needed focus to the movement. The campaign would use a small staff

to support state partners, adapting its message and campaign tactics to individual states, over a 5-7 year timeframe, starting with 3-4 states in 2016.

This funding would replace, and increase current funding for advocacy.

- **Service-based registration (\$100,000):** Groups such as the National Association of Community Health Centers which see millions of patients have expressed a desire to begin helping their low-income clients realize the importance of civic participation. This approach will take more initial research and small-scale experimentation, but if the model is proved it could have a permanent impact on low-income voter turnout.

We believe these efforts will alter the electorate, but they will not do it in time to fully achieve the Wyss policy agenda within the next ten years.

Transformative engagement strategies

Foundations can support non-partisan registration and get out the vote efforts (GOTV). Recent data-driven innovations allow these techniques to be targeted to under-represented populations. At the same time, ten years of testing has lowered the cost and increased the effectiveness of mail, online, and in-person methodologies. If applied at-scale in areas with fast growing Latino and African-American populations, rigorously executed engagement could transform the electorate in just a few years. To achieve the maximum impact, we have recommended consideration of a blend of strategies that maximize cost-efficiencies for impact on a broad scale, while utilizing higher-cost (but highly effective) approaches in a more targeted way to reach places and constituencies that will impact our issue work.

- **Registration surge (\$10 million):** The cost of successful mail-based registration has dropped to less than \$5 dollars per registrant, making it possible to consider a “surge” strategy that would transform the electorate between now and 2020. Climate funders recently retained data-analysts to do a preliminary assessment of the opportunity. They used careful cost-modeling based on well-documented past registration work and real-world turnout performance (only a portion of those registered vote) to demonstrate that an investment of \$100 million dollars over five years could close the participation gap among African Americans and Latinos in twelve states at a scale that would exceed the margin of victory in six past elections. For example, in Florida, the model suggests that registration costing just over \$16 million dollars would result in 117,212 new votes by 2018, exceeding the 6-year average state-wide vote margin of 110,701 (coming very close to that margin in 2016).

Though the work comes at a high cost and there are many questions still to be answered, a surge approach may be worth additional vetting. Given the high cost, this would have to be done in partnership with other funders.

- **Building progressive power (\$3 million):** There is some evidence to suggest that person-to-person conversations, although relatively expensive, can be particularly effective in persuading people who feel shut out of the political system to register and ultimately vote. Community-based organizing is also drives most successful issue advocacy—groups that represent large-numbers of people (especially voters) are best positioned to successfully advocate for policy-change.

The most sophisticated state-based groups are systematically recruiting people (identified using new data-tools) and then developing them into members and activists who attend events and meet with elected officials on issues— and then mobilizing their communities through registration, turnout drives, and petition gathering for ballot initiatives. This is what Planned Parenthood is doing systematically - and effectively—for reproductive rights.

On our economic agenda, a set of promising state groups are attempting to obtain a similar level of political sophistication, but with limited funding that

seldom allows them to do year-round, ongoing engagement. In states such as Georgia, Colorado, and Florida, that will be critical on multiple economic issues such as minimum wage and paid sick leave, a complementary investment in membership development and political engagement tools could accelerate our agenda. These strategies are best applied in a limited number of places.

- **Reaching non-voters (\$2million):** Recent research into people who are eligible to vote but not registered, found a complex combination of factors were collectively dissuading them from voting – some are turned off by bitter politics, some feel as if they are not well-enough informed, some do not connect the act of voting to anything that affects their daily lives. A deeper understanding of the non-participating citizen could be used to craft outreach methodologies that are best-designed to turn the various identified group out to vote in a particular election. Additional research into voter attitudes about voting could help refine many of the approaches discussed above, and inform experiments that use communications micro-targeted tools to reach identified audiences with a message that will motivate them to engage.

Democracy Program Budget

In estimating overall spending over ten years for the Wyss Foundation, we estimated \$100 million over ten years for voting efforts. What we are proposing now is to accelerate a portion of that (approximately \$75 million) into an immediate five year window, and spend it on a registration and engagement surge. We would evaluate our longer-term investments in systems at that point, possibly recommending some additional funding.

	Proposed	5 year
Systems*		\$ 24,250,000
Litigation on voting laws (ACLU)	\$ 750,000	\$ 3,750,000
Government-based registration	\$ 1,750,000	\$ 8,750,000
Advocacy on voting laws	\$ 3,000,000	\$ 15,000,000
Service-based registration experiments	\$ 100,000	\$ 500,000
Engagement		\$ 25,000,000
Integrated engagement and organizing	\$ 3,000,000	\$ 15,000,000
Non-voter research and outreach	\$ 2,000,000	\$ 10,000,000

Registration Surge	\$ 10,000,000	\$ 50,000,000
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Democracy Program 5-year total*		\$ 99,250,000
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*ACLU's work on voting is core support, and not included in the program totals.